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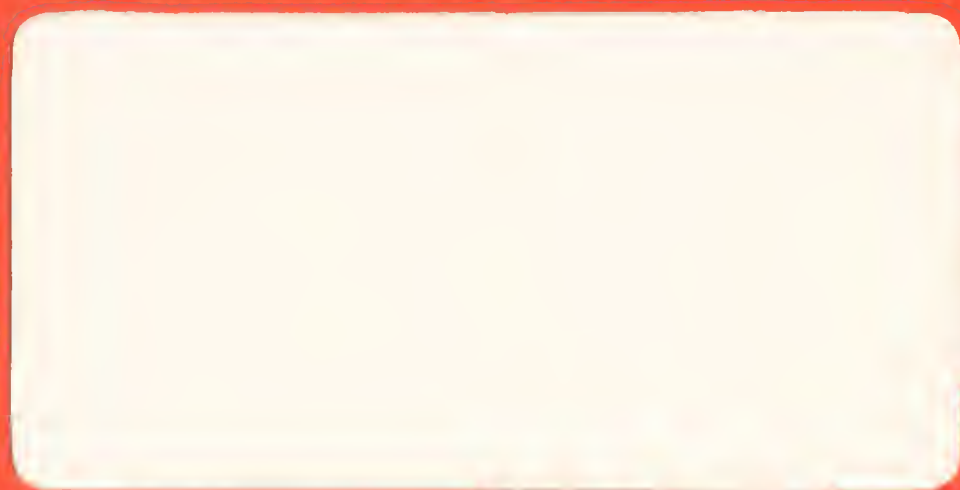
"CHEWING ASS OUT": THE ENACTMENT OF POWER
RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH LANGUAGE AND RITUAL

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of Business Administration

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College of Commerce and Business Administration
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign



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Summary

Organization designers give too little attention to how structures emerge through processes of social interaction. They often implicitly presume that what is designed can be implemented through imposition or "organizational development."

In this paper we argue, and empirically illustrate, that power relationships can emerge, in part, through statements and rituals which effectively "create" subordination. Speech events which can enact this relationship may provide supervisors with access to power when other avenues such as expertise and legitimized social expectations fail. When effectively executed, such language based rituals can also thwart the intentions of system designers and others who seek to implement significant organizational change.

Presentation

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Studies of structure tend to avoid the problem of structural generation and elaboration. Designers usually implicitly presume that structural change can be imposed . . . that relationships are, somehow, demergent: they are in place when incumbents move into them and can be changed through a combination of design staff expertise and organizational development tactics. A few disparate theorists, like William F. Whyte [20] and Egon Bittner [3], have reminded us for decades that structure is also emergent and that structural relationships must be studied over time as they occur and change. For without knowledge of how structure emerges, these pioneers suggested, we won't be able to effectively design organizations or--perhaps more correctly--we won't be able to implement the designs we make.

With the publication of Weick's The Social Psychology Of Organizing [19] and Silverman's Theory Of Organizations [18], people started to pay more attention to such dynamic approaches to structure. Most recently Ranson, Hinings, and Greenwood [17] argue that the traditional perspective which views structure as a function of environmental and contextual constraints must be complimented with a perspective which acknowledges the creativity of organization members to establish/generate structures within these contextual constraints. While all conceivable structures may not be possible, multiple alternatives exist for any given set of constraints. Organizations are to some extent self-designing. What is needed, therefore, are studies of the generation of structure--studies which identify patterns and processes which characterize the emergent qualities of structural relationships.

This paper discusses one of the many structures arising in organizations—the generation of power relationships. We define power, along with Emerson [7], as a relational concept: power is exhibited when one person gets another to do something despite resistance; or, alternatively, when one person gets another not to do something he or she wants to do. Much has been written about the bases of such power. There is, for example, expert power, and referent power, and power legitimated by position. Yet we know little about how one converts these possible sources of control over others into ongoing power relationships. And surely this translation is sometimes problematic, for we have all seen powerless experts, powerless referents and powerless bosses.

Organization theorists have reason to be particularly interested in the emergence or generation of power relationships from a legitimate organizational base, or position in an established hierarchy. Simply put, how do bosses acquire and maintain power? How do they get their subordinates to act (or not act) against their inclinations? Perhaps the most compelling theoretical answer to these questions to date is offered by Blau [4] and other exchange theorists. The exchange perspective suggests that hierarchical position provides bosses with resources which can be spent to secure behavior which is advantageous to the boss, the organization or both. While we are persuaded by much in this perspective, it presumes that position power must be based upon access to resources in order to be effective. We do not believe this always to be the case, and in this paper we seek to demonstrate that potential position power can be translated into actual power through the use of language and ritual. Our more specific focus is on one such pattern: the blaming ritual.

If the intelligent use of resources for exchange purposes is the lighter side of power acquisition, establishing blame is one aspect of the darker side of emerging power relationships. In analyzing blaming rituals from one organizational setting we have come to the following broad outline of how such encounters engender and support hierarchically-based power. A person occupying a superior position in a hierarchy often is looked to as the person who is responsible for defining problems and diagnosing their causes. These situations are often ambiguous and open to definition [15]. They often reflect a tension between requirements for task efficiency and culturally derived ceremonies of performance as noted by Meyer and Rowan [14]. The boss, therefore, has leeway in problem identification and diagnosis to create a definition of the situation which mandates certain behaviors. When individuals are insufficiently socialized or, for other reasons, fail to conform, the boss may use a special blaming ritual to help define the situation. He/she can identify the individual or individuals who are resisting as the problem. The diagnosis often takes the form of tying blame to personal attributions: the subordinates are not conforming to desired behavior, for example, because they are lazy or incompetent.

Those who use this blaming strategy and those who are its recipients have several labels for it. While among academics what we are talking about is often called "degradation" [8], in organizations it's called dumping, shitting, reeming, and screwing. A particularly colorful label, one used by both blamers and blamees in the organization we have studied is "chewing ass out".

"Chewing ass out" is called upon when other methods fail--when the boss cannot or has not been able to use exchanges to generate power, when resistance occurs or appears to be imminent despite the use of other bases of power. Yet these blaming rituals are not the procedures of last resort. They often precede the invocation of official sanctions such as suspension, docking, or termination. The latter reflect failure to exercise power and are costly both in terms of training and other replacement costs and in terms of the impact of such sanctions on the remaining employees. They damage the use of exchange, for example, by exposing the often involuntary nature of compliance. This is particularly costly in "democratic" organizations in which members value freedom of choice and believe that voluntary activity is the most effective means for securing efficiency and productivity. As the boss we will describe told his immediate subordinates in a staff meeting: "It's the easiest thing in the world to fire someone. What you need is cooperation."

This manager was obliged by his superiors to cooperate with a clear-cut institutional embodiment of a democratic-voluntaristic belief system: a quality of work experiment conducted in his plant. The presence of this program, its acceptance by his superiors, and the ever-present "outsiders" implementing and evaluating the experiment, made the overt application of coercive tactics even more costly than they otherwise would have been. As one of the frequently present set of outsiders, one of the authors therefore was able to observe some of the more subtle processes associated with the enactment of power relations.

Hierarchical position was the primary asset of the boss who serves as the focus of this study. Although he was the plant manager, he was relatively new to the plant and did not have much of an expertise-oriented

power base. The organization was very centralized at corporate headquarters. The manager had few discretionary resources with which to engage in exchange relations. The quality of work program helped limit the frequent and overt use of coercion. Yet he (perhaps properly) felt he had to get employees to do his bidding in order to meet very rigid production schedules, schedules which were compromised by the amount of employee time the quality of work experiment consumed without providing (at least in the short run) direct return. As we will see, his response provided documentation for Ranson et. al.'s [17] contention that establishing power relationships can be a creative act. In this case, the plant manager forged and maintained considerable control even as external designers and change agents tried to tip the balance toward greater worker involvement.

Discourse Analysis

Before getting into the story, we need to emphasize that people don't always mean what they say or say what they mean. In this case, the plant manager's sentences almost always allowed for a defense which could begin with "but I was only" (e.g., but I was only explaining our way of doing things, but I was only trying to make sure it didn't happen again.) The visible impact of the manager's words in what we identify as blaming rituals were often at odds with this benign interpretation. We therefore need a method for getting at meaning without having to consider only words, tones, and their sequencing.

Malcom Coulthard has written a book titled Introduction to Discourse Analysis [6] which reviews a good deal of recent work in linguistics, philosophy, sociology and anthropology designed to deal with precisely this problem. The key concern of the authors he reviews is with "the

rules of use which describe how utterances perform social acts" [6: 9, author's emphasis].

Several of the researchers reviewed by Coulthard argue strongly that one cannot fully understand the meaning of a statement without reference to implicit assumptions being made by the participants in the discourse--speakers and listeners. Lakoff, for example, says that: ". . . in order to predict correctly the applicability of many rules one must be able to refer to assumptions about the social context of an utterance, as well as to other implicit assumptions made by the participants in a discourse" [9]. There are, therefore, non-linguistic (social) components of speech, components beyond simply phonology, grammar, and discourse. These components have to do, among other things, with intention and the interpretation of intention.

Discourse analysts and sociolinguists have developed different schemes for classifying linguistic and non-linguistic parts of speech. These schemes often overlap and can be confusing. They also tend to focus on the speaker and fail to adequately distinguish between intentions and interpretations of speakers and listeners (e.g., Austin [1]). We have therefore developed a classification scheme which, while based upon earlier efforts (especially [1] and [6]), makes more of the distinction between intent and response. The categories are:

locutionary act: the act of verbalizing

illocutionary act: non-linguistic acts which carry
meaning

perlocutionary intention: what the speaker intends
to do through speaking

perlocutionary response: what is done through speaking.

The locutionary act is the act of saying something. Illocutionary acts, such as ritual gestures, the display of symbols, help define the context of the utterance and thereby provide clues as to its meaning. The perlocutionary intention, for the class of utterances of concern in this paper, defines what the speaker intends to do through saying. We are not concerned here with simple descriptions or statements of fact.

Rather, we are interested in utterances which have the potential of doing something through the saying of it. We are concerned, therefore, with what discourse analysts call "performatives" or "speech acts."

For example, a minister pronounces a couple man and wife. The pronouncement does the thing that's said. Similarly, a referee declares a foul. Weick's description of Simon's story of the umpires is useful here:

The story goes that three umpires disagreed about the task of calling balls and strikes. The first one said, "I calls them as they is." The second one said, "I calls them as I sees them." The third and cleverest umpire said, "They ain't nothin' till I calls them."
[19:1]

Weick properly credits the third umpire with recognizing a " . . . key element in organizational life: the important role that people play in creating the environments that impose on them" [19:5]. The "reality" of the foul, the ball, or the strike is as much created by the referee or the umpire as it is by the "facts" or even by "perceptions" of facts.

Utterances, then, can create reality. They define reality and are particularly important when there is little consensus about the "facts" or when there are divergent "perceptions"; in short, when the cues are equivocal. But it may go deeper than this. Locution may qualify as performative by affecting individuals' perceptions of themselves. Take

the jury whose members declare a defendant guilty. That defendant then can become guilty, in the mind of the public and even in his/her own eyes. Or students who hear from their professor that they do not have what it takes to be creative thinkers. The student can become mundane. The speech act or performative creates through saying.

The perlocutionary response refers to the actual impact of the speaker's remarks on the listener or listeners. It is that which gets created. This response does not always match the speakers intention. Locutionary acts are often more ambiguous than those uttered by umpires, by ministers, or judges in the process of performing their formal duties. For example, saying "I promise," "I apologize," or "I warn you" performs the act uttered; however, there are few conventions governing their use, and it is not always clear, therefore, what the speaker is trying to do [6:14].

Listeners therefore may misunderstand and "misrespond" to locutionary acts. The intrinsic ambiguity of language and situation also allows the listener to intentionally misread such acts, especially if he or she wants to resist the implications of the utterance. The speaker, likewise, may intentionally disguise her/his perlocutionary intention, especially if it is not congruent with the prevailing cultural values or beliefs. For example, a supervisor may want to order a subordinate to do something, but in the face of values associated with democracy and voluntarism, she/he may begin the locution with something like "would you please . . . " or "can you . . .". The speaker's perlocutionary intention would be less ambiguously conveyed if the superior were to say "I order you to do X." Listeners who misread the boss's

perlocutionary intent, however, and choose not to follow a "suggestion", do so at their peril.

While many orders phrased as requests are clearly and "properly" interpreted in organizations, there are also many possibilities for confusion--on the part of both speaker and listener. Consider the following alternatives:

Boss' Locutionary Act	Boss' perlocutionary Intention (#1)	Subordinate's per- locutionary response (#2)
Excuuuuuuuuse me!	You <u>are</u> a Jerk	I'm sorry
I am shocked	You have done something awful	I feel surprised
You don't know your job	You <u>are</u> an ignoramus	You're poorly trained
You fail this exam	You <u>are</u> a failure	You do not know this material
You have not done your homework	You <u>are</u> a lazy bum	You did not study

If column #1 identifies intention of the speaker, a response from column 2 misfires (from the boss's perspective), and can make trouble for the recalcitrant subordinate. A perlocutionary intention from #2 matched with a response from #1 can also lead to unhappy results.

Misreadings of both sorts can lead to "communication problems." These problems arise from a gap between perlocutionary intention and perlocutionary response. But ambiguity can also be put to use. When the organization requires directed action and cannot, if only for resource-limitation problems, conform to prevailing participatory values, the speaker must disguise his or her perlocutionary intent. This increases equivocality. Listeners who misread this intent--for

example, those who focus attention on culture-conforming or ceremonial statements such as "I would appreciate it if you . . .", can feel they've experienced a "communication problem" when the manager expresses displeasure or anger at a response which does not closely match his/her intent. Even then, however, the manager cannot explain directly why he is angry. Such an expression would reveal a violation of socially accepted values and norms.

One way a speaker can communicate his/her perlocutionary intent without directly confronting incompatible social values or beliefs is to emphasize the illocutionary aspects of speech. Rituals and symbols tend to be more ambiguous than sentences, at least to the uninitiated. By engaging others in a guessing game, analogous to Weick's description of the enactment or charades [19:152], a speaker can reward or punish acceptable and unacceptable interpretation of his or her utterance until the listeners converge on a solution congruent with the speaker's perlocutionary intent. With a sufficient number of iterations, the enactment process can become a social ritual which creates and maintains the intended results without ever requiring an explicit utterance. Ambiguous utterances, then, can realize the speaker's perlocutionary intention and elicit the desired perlocutionary response through a careful and consistent use of illocutionary acts associated with the utterance. Locutions, therefore, can be effective speech acts or performatives through the appropriate use of rituals and symbols. Such rituals will have evolved through a process of reinforcement over time and therefore rituals are likely to be unique to particular cultures. The uninitiated will miss the real importance of the locution, often intendedly so.

So long as there is

- 1) a conventional procedure (ritual),
- 2) particular persons and circumstances (e.g., one in the correct hierarchical position, speaking at the right time, in the right place),
- 3) correct performance of all, and
- 4) complete performance by all.

a speech act is likely to elicit the intended response.¹ Without all four of these components, however, the performance misfires, and the reality it creates is not enacted. For example: the guilty verdict doesn't work if there is procedural error which, via another (properly performed) combination of locutionary and illocutionary acts, is judged to cause a mistrial. The umpire who hesitates implicitly acknowledges that his act is not intended as a performative, but rather a statement of perception which can be judged by others as well as by himself . . . boos, hoots, and opposition often follow. When all four characteristics are in place, however, the illocutionary act does what it says. It illicitly the intended response thereby creates a social reality, even--and perhaps especially--when it is not possible or feasible to conduct the construction process explicitly.

Background on the Site

To understand meanings associated with statements, we have argued, it is essential to know something about the historical/cultural context in which locutionary acts occur. The material covered in this paper is drawn from one plant in a large, billion dollar division of an even larger organization. This division was formed around the turn of the century when advances in food preserving technology and transportation made a nation-wide food processing firm feasible. Food production moved

quickly from a small-shop production basis to a mass production basis, and the production function gave way in importance to the preserving and marketing functions. Almost anyone could produce the goods; the competitive advantage came to those who could preserve it and achieve brand recognition for preservation.

The plant which serves as the focus of the study was built in 1948. It is located in the south and uses primarily unskilled labor. The work itself is often difficult work done under conditions involving heat, humidity, and noisy machinery. The production process is patterned after an almost classic industrial engineering paradigm: assembly-line, with a functional division of labor. Similarly, a lack of direct job related amenities is felt to be compensated for by relatively high wages and fringe benefits.

According to the union business agent, who was there at the time, the first plant manager " . . . operated (the) plant like it was his home . . . very firm . . . very fair in policing what he did." The first personnel manager was an emotionally "tough" sort of man, but the plant manager was able to tone him down through " . . . a fatherly advice-type thing." Following the first manager were several others. The manager immediately preceeding the one described in this study, again according to the business agent, was " . . . the best organizer of the whole bunch . . . argumentative [but] . . . always trying to find ways to resolve things."

The present plant manager had been in place only a year prior to the intiation of the quality of work program which led to our observation. He had been assistant manager for the preceeding twenty

years in the largest plant owned by the division. It is important that the "best organizer of the whole bunch" was promoted to manage this large plant while the present manager was "promoted" to manage our smaller study site. He was about 62 years old and apparently holding his last position with the company.

Family imagery was used by more than the union business agent to describe the plant and its employees. People spoke of the current plant manager as acting "like a father." One said "we're like a family" and another complained that "we're treated like children." There was some sense that the family-atmosphere was deteriorating . . .

"This plant has lost the family atmosphere it used to have . . . my wife . . . she's been out there 28 years . . . if a woman got pregnant [it used to be] you couldn't carry the gifts out the door . . . "

But the control implications of the family metaphor were still strong--even for the speaker above. In describing how to get people to change, for example, he felt:

"Its gotta be done on a gradual, firm, constructive approach . . . just like you would raise your child . . . you gotta police it like they were children."

Paternalistic discipline and support often were intertwined within this pervasive family imagery (" . . . we fight, but we stick together against others"), as one of the top managers indicated in an interview:

Manager: We make hundreds of decisions every day, and people don't know it, but we make them for them.

Interviewer: Would it help if more people knew the kinds of decisions you were making and the reasons why you make them as you do?

Manager: No. Some people, not very many, will use that kind of information against you. A little knowledge is a bad thing. One bad apple spoils the bunch:

this is never truer than on a packing line. When I walk out on the floor, I hear "buzz, buzz." This is what I call singing. When there's no singing, then something's wrong and I have to decide whether to look into it to find out what's up. One person on a line can hurt us very badly.

Interviewer: Would it help if the [quality of work program] could find a way to increase trust and cooperation so that this sort of problem would be minimized?

Manager: Wait a minute! We have the most cooperative people in the company. I'll put my people against any others from any other plant. We have great cooperation and people are eager workers. It's just that some people would like nothing better than to stick it up my ass . . . or your ass.

"Chewing Ass Out:" A Blaming Ritual

Staff meetings were held in a relatively small conference room adjoining the plant manager's office. The manager's office was panelled and carpeted. The conference room had a linoleum tile floor and light green unadorned walls. Prior to each meeting, the manager generally waited in his relatively larger office until his subordinates had entered and taken their positions around a long narrow table, leaving the head position open. The manager would then enter through the separate door from his office, usually with a pile of documents, and begin the meeting, often with a prefatory "gentlemen . . . "

Rituals which we interpret as enacting power relations (and thus controlling subordinates) were frequent occurrences during staff meetings. A common theme placed the plant manager in the role of teacher. For example, at the beginning of one meeting, the plant manager introduced a copy of an article from Reader's Digest titled "The Businessman." He then asked each subordinator in turn to read a paragraph out loud and pass it on until the article had been read in its entirety.

Many staff meeting rituals, however, may be fully understandable only as a special class of performatives--speech acts which created subordination by degrading the subordinates. These rituals frequently began with a challenge to the group and ended by the manager expressing disappointment or disdain when a particular individual failed to demonstrate an adequate level of competence. The requisite competence, however, was left to the judgement of the plant manager, and the demonstrations often were contrived to exhibit the subordinate's ignorance, lack of dedication, etc.

Dale F. (a disguised name), the newest member to the senior staff, was the most frequent recipient of blame. He had become superintendent of the assembly operation after serving in the research department at corporate headquarters. He was well educated, articulate, and urbane. He also had had no previous experience in assembly operations, and this lack of experience frequently resulted in production errors. In addition to his primary duties as assembly supervisor, Dale was also the co-chairman of the quality of work committee formed by plant employees and was personally very committed to finding new ways to involve employees in making important decisions for plant operations.

The following descriptions, generated from notes taken by an outside observer, indicate the variety of ways in which Dale was "chewed out" in staff meetings:

March 16: Discussion in the staff meeting turned to the problem of who should pick up samples for quality control checks. The head of quality control felt that samples should be delivered to his office by employees from the assembly operation. Dale [as head of assembly] felt that quality control employees had fewer time constraints, as they did not have to keep pace with continuously flowing product. [The plant manager] after listening to the discussion for a while noted, using a semi-angry tone, that "problems start in the assembly area with an improper

mixture or temperature. You [looking at Dale] should be the most concerned that rechecks are picked up, tested, and the proper adjustments made." This ended the discussion; however, Dale expressed considerable anger after the meeting, feeling that he had been publically chastized.

April 20: [It was generally known that Dale had been having marital problems, although he had taken considerable care to keep this information secret.] After a brief statement about how everyone has to learn to balance the demands of work life and family life, the plant manager said, "My door is always open to discuss family problems people are having. I do not want to see outside problems causing a slowdown in the plant."

May 2: [During the previous week, the plant failed to pass a company inspection.] Responsibility for the failure was placed on Dale and John W., the superintendent of the department responsible for sanitation. John had been planning a vacation trip to Colorado. The plant manager concluded his review of the failed inspection by saying, "I can't understand how some people can plan vacations when these sorts of things are going on." After the meeting, John said he felt that his commitment to the plant had been called into question.

May 4: [Plant efficiency ratings had dropped.] As the plant manager entered the room, the assistant manager looked around and said: "does everyone have their seatbelts on?" Blame for the falling ratings was placed squarely on Dale's shoulders. After the meeting Dale said he failed to understand why the others were asked to be present, since "I was the only one who had to be there."

June 8: Mngr: Gentlemen, I want each of you to tell me your efficiency objective for the month. (followed by silence. No volunteers)
Mr. F., what is your efficiency objective for the month?

Dale: (Considerable pause) I don't have one, sir.

Mngr: (disgustedly) Any superintendent worth his salt has an efficiency objective.

The topic then was dropped. No others were asked to report their efficiency objective.

July 13: Mngr: Gentlemen, I want to commend you on the wonderful party for Don G.'s retirement. [Dale had failed to attend Don's retirement party.] Not everyone attended, though, and some were department heads . . . they sure are willing to socialize at quality of work committee meetings.

Not all control rituals ended in Dale's degradation. For example, the plant manager opened one staff meeting with, "Gentlemen, what are our four objectives?" These objectives had been announced at corporate headquarters, but it was unlikely that anyone at the plant could have known that they were community, attitude, energy, and safety. No one responded to the manager's question, and he simply ended the discussion with "I'm disappointed in you."

The lack of response to the manager's questions was not only typical; there seemed to be a norm against responding. At one point, the superintendent of the maintenance department was replaced. The new superintendent had not been socialized into staff meeting norms, and tended to try to answer the manager's questions. He received noticeable scowls from his counterparts and soon became as mute as they.

The contrived nature of these rituals, set up so that there often were no adequate answers, is especially clear in the following sequence:

Mngr: Gentlemen, what are the five E's? (silence)
Mr. F., what are the five E's?

Dale: uh . . . uh . . . (slouching) . . . the environment.

Mngr: Yes . . .

Dale: uh . . . energy

Mngr: That's two . . .

Dale: uh . . . uh . . . I don't know . . .

Mngr: (standing and becoming red in the face . . . clenching his fists) I am disgruntled, distented, and filled with disgruntment!!!!

Prior to the meeting, few, if any, had ever heard of the five E's. The perlocutionary intention, it seems to us, was neither to inform nor

"test" subordinates, but to enact subordination. In addition, the ritual was so common, such an integral part of the staff meetings, that there was a very good match between the perlocutionary intention and the perlocutionary response. Even when the manager mishandled his expression of anger, ("I am disgruntled, distented and filled with disgruntment") no one laughed. Everyone knew what was being done. Of course, after the meeting, Dale took great delight in the manager's "disgruntment." During the meeting, however, he was quite serious and embarrassed.

Chewing ass out was not restricted to staff meetings. They were part of daily routine in the plant. One of the mechanics described a typical situation as follows:

When there's a machine broken in the assembly shop, they call me down there to work on it. I get there and there's a crowd of people standing around it. So I can't get to it to work on it. It's all the foremen standing around trying to decide who is to blame for the breakdown. After they find somebody, then they let me get to work.

In another incident, a supervisor in the packaging department expressed sincere surprise that the people associated with the quality of work program expected him to get his subordinates to work but "won't let me be mean."

An employee survey was conducted as part of the quality of work program. Results of this survey were fed back to employees in small work groups, and the resulting discussions provided additional insight into the use of control rituals. When the discussion revolved around "communication problems" (only 38% of the employees agreed that "At work communication is good."), it was frequently noted that, as one

employee put it, "You don't find out things until your ass gets chewed out."

It is our belief that what gets "found out" in these blaming rituals is the fact of a gap between the perlocutionary intentions and listeners' responses. Anger at attributions of personal characteristics as sources of such problems were common in these discussions.

Darlene: Once I said the line was goin' too fast. The supervisor said, "you're nuthin but a gripe." "I'm an individual!"

Rebecca: When I express myself, they say "there goes Rebecca again. Always griping."

Todd: Before work begins, we gripe. When it comes to talking to supervisors, no one speaks up . . . if you do, you're labelled as a trouble-maker.

Beatrice: We get hollered at. Eleanore and I are in trouble all the time! If you get a reputation, you never outlive it. Take me. I'm always late, even if I get here at 7 [on time]. Eleanore too . . . she's a "troublemaker" and has a problem with "absenteeism." Supervisors sit there and hold kangaroo court on people.

An interesting sequence occurred when one group was shown results showing that 43% of the employees agreed with the statement "my co-workers are afraid to express their real views." A supervisor in the group took up the defense.

Supervisor: I like to argue, but I don't lose respect when people speak up . . .

Subordinate: You get damn mad at 'em though.

Supervisor: When people argue with me, do I tell 'em they're no good?

Maintenance person: Let's change the subject [general laughter].

(Forty percent of the employees agreed with the statement, "my supervisor looks for someone to blame when something goes wrong.")

It has been our contention that blaming rituals, whether intended or not, can function as performatives. The judgements rendered can create the facts they are attributing just as jury decisions function to enact guilt or innocence. The impact of such performatives on the recipients of the blaming ritual can be substantial. One employee, referring to the impact of the quality of work program, said, "some people have gotten to know each other, but he's [the plant manager] still a manager to me . . . when [he] doesn't recognize me as a human being, we've failed as human beings!" A similar response was provided by a lower-level supervisor:

If you bring anything up, [the plant manager] directs rage at you, so you don't say anything. I feel he should let us know that if we have anything on our mind we can talk about it without him getting in a rage and embarrassing you in front of the committee . . . nobody has calmed him down or called a halt. But he just goes on and on, and you're sitting there like a little fool. He doesn't say anything till things don't go his way. Then he stands and lets you have it . . . he sits there like a jailer.

Interviewer: It sounds like he has you in prison.

Supervisor: Especially your words, the things on your mind . . .

Ritual and Control

We contend that the "chewing ass out" incidents described above, especially those observed in staff meetings, fulfill all four of the requirements which allow an otherwise ambiguous statement to make something so by saying it. They follow a conventional procedure (e.g., established seating pattern, the manager entering last by a separate door, the stack of materials placed on the table) in well established circumstances (e.g., the weekly staff meeting itself).

They also involve correct and complete performance. Each instance of chewing ass out that we identified had the following commonalities.

- an utterance performed by the manager
- "cues" of anger, including red face, increase in volume
- silence on the part of the audience
- silence, or occasional limited response, on the part of the direct recipient

Understanding of the ritualistic nature of these events seemed to be understood on all sides. When the boss declared he was "disgruntled, distented, and filled with disgruntment!"--nobody laughed. And, when a new supervisor joined the meetings from the maintenance group, and attempted to respond to the apparent "objective" meaning of the statements, he was quickly informed by the veterans not to become involved.

The effectiveness of the chewing ass out ritual seems to depend primarily on two features:

1. surprise. Although the setting was a well recognized stage for these events, the exact nature of the blame was almost always completely unpredictable.
2. unanswerable logic. In addition, each situation involved a question or accusation for which there could be no correct answer. The plant manager's response to the problem of who should pick up samples was to attribute lack of concern to Dale. Should Dale challenge such a subtly applied attribution and make it explicit by so doing, or should he demonstrate his concern by agreeing to pick up the samples? Either way he loses and he ended up being forced to do what he did not want to do.

A question to be asked is why the ritualistic form continues--since it is a mutual production of the boss, the recipient and the audience. Three somewhat contradictory answers can be given to this question. On the one hand, once the pattern becomes established, rituals may take a great deal of energy to change. Established behavior is the path of

least resistance. Many encounters within an organization may be classified as rituals for this reason alone. More revealing, the ritual is useful from the bosses perspective because it intensifies the message--the perlocutionary intent. Especially given the difficulty of exhibiting direct heavy handed control, the chewing-ass-out ritual was one way of "marking" a control event and insuring that subordinates will be careful to do as they are "asked."

In opposition to this function of the ritual, it may be that the chewing ass ritual also contains the bosses attempt at control. Subordinates are thus motivated to play the part--and make sure their fellows play theirs. The course of the performance and the end of the performance is known. The ritual in itself "cools" the boss and perhaps allows him to "vent" himself on relatively unimportant matters.

Scatological and Sexual Language and Control

From the start our curiosity was piqued by the frequent use of sexual and scatological language in describing blaming rituals at this site. Many incidents echo the overall reference to these events as "chewing ass out"--the label used both by the manager and by employees. For example, the superintendent warned that "some people would like nothing better than to stick it up my ass . . . or your ass." Employees often expressed concern that "somebody is going to get fucked" because of the quality of work program.

These examples of scatological or sexual language are certainly not unique to this organizational site, and they also reflect conventional informal language broadly used in society today. We suggest,

however, that such language should be taken seriously by those who want to understand the implications of control.

It is interesting, for example, that euphemisms are not used in this setting. Bosmajian's work on "The Language of Oppression" [5], gives many examples of the way in which the structure of power and control is thus veiled from view. The underlying analysis is that "when a word acquires a bad connotation by association with something people find unpleasant or embarrassing to think of, people will reach for substitutes for that word that do not have this uncomfortable effect [9:57].

Lakoff's discussion of job terminology, for example, suggests that

For at least some speakers, the more demeaning the job, the more the person holding it (if female, of course) is likely to be described as a lady. Thus cleaning lady is at least as common as cleaning woman, saleslady or saleswoman. But one says, normally, woman doctor. To say lady doctor is to be very condescending; it constitutes an insult. [10:59-60]

Compare this with Bosmajian's discussion of the language used by participants in the Vietnam war [5:125-128]. "Pacification" of villages involved forced relocation, burning all household possessions, and shooting resisters. An "air raid," was known as a "routine limited duration protective reaction." One crewman described his participation in such raids as like "delivering the mail."

Why do all participants (the boss and his subordinates) retain the title "chewing ass out," and its relatives, rather than reaching for such substitutes in the setting we've studied? We take this language as graphically describing a sense of personal abuse--the extension of control beyond the range of "you do not understand this job" to "you are personally deficient; you are the problem." This language expresses

the intensity of the boss' intent and the intensity of the subordinate's response. The "fact" that chewing ass out is beyond ordinary control is recognized through the use of this language.

.. On the other hand, just as ritual "contains" the blame, so does the use of sexual and scatological language. It keeps the more extensive forms of control at the informal level--where they rarely get into formal meetings or formal records. Calling these events instances of "chewing ass out" decouples them from other control efforts--a separation of potential benefit to the boss who could get called on the carpet by his own superiors for going beyond the cultural norms, and by the subordinate who does not want to be public about a definition of the situation which makes his/her personal attributes part of the problem.

This possibility suggests that the language of "chewing ass out" may also be in part intended for effect. Swearing at one level may be a genuine emotional release while on another level be uttered with the intent of getting others to see the speech events so marked as out of the ordinary range of emotions. Thus the boss may retain the sexual/scatological label to intensify the response of the person chastised. Similarly the employees may retain the label to help convince the boss that the event is taken seriously (even though it is the subject of some joking among themselves).

Task Efficiency and Control

It is usually assumed that hierarchical authority emerged to manage the increasingly complex interdependence created by the division of labor. This thesis has been challenged recently by Stephen Marglin [13] and others who argue that hierarchical authority--and the factory system

with which it is inextricably linked--preceeded rather than followed development in technologies which led to work specialization. Marglin argues that hierarchical authority functioned to increase worker effort through surveillance and control legitimized by the labor contract. When workers contracted for their time rather than their production they became vulnerable to hierarchical surveillance. Employers were thereby able to increase productivity through the use of coercion and this, rather than technological advance, was responsible for the rise of the factory system and its associated control mechanisms.

If Marglin is correct, organizations formed in this country during, say, the first two decades of this century, may have a legacy which stresses the importance of coercion and control. The implicit assumption underlying the use of coercive tactics may be, as we have seen, that supervisors feel they have to be "mean" in order to be productive. Moreover, this assumption may be correct. To the extent that productivity is a function of how hard (as opposed to how efficiently) employees work, coercion may indeed be an important determinant of productivity. Contrary to arguments made by Likert [11, 12] and others, some organizations may lose more than they gain--at least in the short run--by subscribing to more "open" and "participative" management strategies.

Regardless of how valid or invalid the belief in the importance of hierarchical control is, it seems clear that broader societal values have increasingly emphasized freedom of choice and supported a search for alternative strategies of coordination and control--strategies which rely on cooperation rather than coercion. The human relations movement

and, more recently, the quality of work movement reflect these changing values. From Barnard [2] to Mills [15], proponents of this view have been arguing that organizational effectiveness and efficiency require voluntary cooperation and that more traditional methods based upon formal control and managerial decrees are likely to be less and less effective.

The quality of work experiment introduced to the plant studied here as a part of this social movement was thus imposed upon a system which had a long tradition of hierarchical control. Initial support for the experiment came from the division president, a Harvard MBA with a strong commitment to contemporary management techniques designed to instill employee commitment and cooperation. He had risen to the presidency from a staff position and had had little production experience. Nevertheless, he was insistent. In a meeting with national-level production people, including the plant manager at the site we have described, the president said, adding emphasis by hitting the table, "This is a good program. Its got [my] name on it, so it's going to succeed!"

The production managers were considerably less sanguine. The national level head of production had once been an assembler in the very plant we studied. The regional manager had once been the plant's manager. They seemed to be intuitively aware that they were being pressed between an existing structure of control which had a long tradition in the organization and a newer set of values and beliefs which bore little resemblance to--and in fact contradicted--deep-seated organizational realities. The latter required open participative management. The former presumed that such an approach would undermine discipline and lead to a decline in productivity.

This dilemma--between the organization's established, task-related control structure and an alternative generally considered to be more legitimate by the surrounding culture--has been described by Meyer and Rowan [14]. They note that the links between effectiveness and various structures designed to effect coordination and control are often ambiguous. It is not always clear that one structure or another will promote effectiveness. The choice of structures, therefore, rests upon beliefs and values operating in the organization's environment. In the absence of clear-cut tests, structures are accorded legitimacy on the basis of their isomorphism with beliefs and values operating in the society-at-large.

Meyer and Rowan emphasize the fact that "technical activities and demands for efficiency create conflicts and inconsistencies in an . . . organization's efforts to conform to the (culturally determined) ceremonial rules of production . . . these inconsistencies make a concern for efficiency and tight coordination and control problematic" [14:355]. An organization opting only for what it believes to be the most effective structures, therefore, may do so at its peril. In the plant studied here, holding to traditional patterns may result in greater production or, at least, in maintaining current production levels; however, it may also result in the social judgment (by the president of the company, as well as by outsiders) that it is ineffective, since it maintains an authoritarian structure in an increasingly democratic society. Therefore, in Meyer and Rowan's words " . . . the organization must struggle and link the requirements of ceremonial elements to technical activities" [14:356] despite the fact that "categorical (ceremonial) rules conflict with the logic of efficiency" [14:355].

This linking may be done in several ways. Meyer and Rowan describe three possibilities--deccoupling, minimized external evaluation and the "logic of confidence and good faith"--all of which were employed by the firm studied here. In addition, however, the case data we have examined suggests that a "logic of blame" may provide a fourth way in which organizations reconcile demands for efficiency with ceremonial, culturally derived demands. This fourth means of reconciliation is particularly interesting because it reverses many of the assumptions made by Meyer and Rowan in their discussion of the logic of faith and confidence--while having at its core the collaboration required for effective functioning.

First, however, there is evidence of "decoupling," in which "elements of structure are decoupled from activities and from each other" [14:357]. Decoupling was useful in the plant we studied to separate societal and upper management values supporting participation from an authoritarian control style at the plant site. The decoupling was performed, in part, linguistically. The plant manager, caught between superiors who insisted on participation and subordinate supervisors who held to authoritarian styles, engaged in locutionary acts with equivocal meaning. His statements could have been read either as helpful or as authoritarian, as in the case where he said to his staff (but was referring to Dale) that his door was always open but family problems should not interfere with work performance.

This point must be underscored. We have vacillated in deciding on the title for this paper. "Chewing Ass Out"--while used by people at the site we studied to label the phenomenon we have described--seems to be in poor taste for an academic discussion. It is too crass

and at the same time too trivial. And that is precisely the point to be made. The language itself pushes away from the more public, acceptable and ceremonial discussions of control. The tension between social, ceremonial requirements for performance and the requirements of efficiency can be (partially) managed if individuals are defined as the problem, particularly if attributions are made informally by isolating blaming rituals. The language itself, we have argued, precludes wide usage and isolates incidents, thus accomplishing the separation Meyer and Rowan suggest is necessary.

We also found efforts to minimize external evaluation [14:359]. Managers resisted plant-wide employee surveys which were part of the quality of work experiment. The first survey was scheduled only after the division president overruled production management. Feedback of results from the second survey to employees was postponed several times and then cancelled. The day-to-day activities of the outsiders associated with the quality of work experiment were often made very difficult. For example, it took the observation staff several months to arrange an interview with the assistant manager and then the interview was cut short. The assistant manager felt that the quality of work staff was trying to drive a wedge between himself and the plant manager: "It's divide and conquer. I've seen it before." He was particularly averse to talking with one of the outside consultants brought in to help the quality of work committee. The plant manager eventually ruled that this consultant could not speak with the assistant manager unless he, the plant manager, were present. Eventually, the entire observation/evaluation component of the quality of work experiment was prematurely cancelled.

Finally, we have an interesting case of "the logic of confidence and good faith." We suspect that confidence and good faith in the plant we studied arose from the images of school and especially family, which pervaded employees' speech and action. Father-figures and teachers, in this stereotype, know more than other family members. They will be able to understand and deal with discontinuities and other problems. They also can "chew out" subordinates "for their own good" thus reconciling "good faith" with what otherwise may be viewed only as personal abuse.

On the other hand, an alternative to good faith and confidence may be a "logic of bad faith." Parties assuming the worst of each other as individuals may also be able to gloss over more deep seated tensions between ceremonial requirements for performance and technical, efficiency requirements. To paraphrase the mechanic quoted earlier: "When something goes wrong . . . decide who's to blame . . . then let me get back to work." Even the possibility of finding someone to blame may be sufficient to allow the organization to continue relatively undisturbed by the deep-seated discontinuities Meyer and Rowan describe.

CONCLUSION

Meyer and Rowan note that external evaluation will inevitably uncover inconsistencies and behaviors which are socially deemed to be inefficient [14]. We must be careful, therefore, not to render quick judgment. "Bad management" is a relative term and is at least as much a function of the values of the judge as it is of the behavior observed. We also need to avoid the sort of equivocality which underlay "poor communication" in the plant. By labeling the blaming behavior we

observed "bad management" we would place the manager in the position in which he had placed Dale F.

We must view the issue of control--and the use of language and ritual to coerce and control--in a societal context. Language and ritual were among the few tools available to a manager who could not make his claim to legitimacy on expertise, past exchanges, or other "more acceptable" foundations. Yet he had responsibility for getting the product out the door and was evaluated on this basis by his immediate superiors. All he had was his formal position, and using the logic of efficiency noted above, he tried to make do.

We feel strongly that the patterns observed in our plant are not unique. Nor are they isolated at lower levels in organizations. Consider these excerpts from John DeLoren's description of the behavior of top management at General Motors:

Intimidation is a favorite tool, and once again the art of management by intimidation as I know it at GM began with Frederic Donner. He was the master intimidator and often reverted to gimmicks to show his power.

One time in an Administrative Committee meeting he asked the head of GM Truck and Coach Division,

"How many buses did you build last month?"

The executive replied, "Approximately three thousand" or a rounded figure like that. It was an approximation.

Donner scowled and snapped back something like, "Last month you built three thousand, one hundred and eighty-seven vehicles." Whatever the figure was, it was precise.

It was obvious to most of us in the meeting that Donner had just looked it up since the precise figure wasn't all that important. But the fact that he would rattle off the exact production figure in such an authoritarian, arrogant manner told us just one thing, that Donner was trying to make the point, "Look how I know this goddam business, people! Look what a mind I have!" [21:44]

This incident closely follows the form of the "5 E's" and the "4 objectives" episodes we report above. There is also evidence from this controversial book of blame fixing and other labeling behavior similar to our reports of employees becoming "gripes," "troublemakers," and prone to "absenteeism" in the eyes of management.

One of [Keyes] duties was to tell has-been executives that they were going to take an early retirement . . . If one rebelled, he'd gather a case against the executive, break the results to him and then give him the option of being fired or taking early retirement. On one occasion, he built up a case against an executive charging that "he did not travel enough to keep in touch with his operations." Then Keyes turned around and charged another executive whose "time was at hand" with traveling too much. "You're never home minding the store," he told him. In some cases, it was publicly announced that this or that executive was taking early retirement for health reasons. The word around the corporation was "When Keyes tells you that you're sick, you're sick." [21:46,47]

Such practices are deeply rooted in basic organizational and social realities. On our last day in the plant, we were coding data in the staff room next to the manager's office. They were remodeling the offices and a craftsman asked the plant manager where he wanted the air intake vent to be placed.

I want it right above my desk, and I want it to run above the ceiling and come out over (the assistant manager's) desk, so that when I get really mad and jump up and down on my desk, I'll go up into the vent and come out on (the assistant manager's) desk and give him Hell."

He said this lightly and, although we couldn't see him, undoubtedly was smiling. But what was his perlocutionary intention? What might have been the craftsman's immediate perlocutionary response? What might be the response of others in the organization, not least the assistant manager, as this story gets repeated?

Footnote

¹These components are discussed by Austin [1].

M/C/202

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